

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## The last word Unruly consumption

by the editors

Television images from Baghdad and other cities in Iraq showed people, mostly young men, but also older adults and children, carrying, dragging, carting away items: chairs, refrigerators, lighting fixtures, bathtubs, air conditioners, etc. — taking from their (supposedly) despised government and its leaders. The reports continued — looting and even destroying a museum of antiquities, taking everything movable from hospitals. Soon after, some other images appear — local neighborhoods erecting roadblocks to stem the flow of looters with armed men patrolling the streets around their homes, trying to keep outsiders from entering and leaving with stolen goods.

When taking Baghdad, the U.S. government and army wanted television images showing the Iraqi people's jubilation at liberation but were not getting any good footage. U. S. troops suddenly came out to help topple statues of Saddam Hussein, producing photo opportunities for the embedded news cameras. At that time, the Bush administration was glad to get the public "joy" of looting and the quaint local custom of throwing shoes and sandals at fallen statues. Presidential press secretary Ari Fleisher told the press, "Looting is a reaction to oppression."

But looting (the mob) has its own rhythm and gender — that of young men. Shortly after these "jubilant Iraqi" images served their use, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld complained about media images showing mostly looting. Embedded journalism became a burden to the government when the reporters no longer depicted the romance of traveling with the troops and those same journalists were going around an urban center looking for stories. The images of looters became anxiety producing, connoting now a sense of "lawlessness." After all, fear of the mob goes back to peasant revolts and the the French Revolution, and it continues in today's anxieties about grassroots political demonstrations, such as the WTO protests.

Clearly looting is a form of consumption. And the U.S. promotes consumption. But in Iraq it got out of hand and moved on to destruction

and vandalism. Lenin described revolution as the "festival of the oppressed." But he was talking about a mass uprising, overthrowing a repressive regime through the efforts of large numbers of the population, and the resulting celebration was about the power of the people themselves. Such images are seen in Eisenstein's *October*, a film which itself was based in the annual re-enactment of the historical event of the Soviet Revolution.

The problem with fixing the meaning of Baghdad's "reappropriation" events stems from fear about the breakdown of civil society. Inner city uprisings must be deplored, stopped, put down because they attack property rights and the established order. When a body politic is out of control, disorder threatens power. But U.S. troops entered Baghdad to overthrow a government the administration had labeled bad, so disorder was....good? Theft was good? Jay Leno ran a TV commercial parody on the *Tonight Show* showing a "Crazy Abdul," against a background of Baghdad looters; he was telling everyone to come on down to his store where you could get real "steals" on furniture and appliances.

Is there such a thing as too much consumption? You'd find it hard to conclude that from U.S. culture, with bigger and bigger SUV's and supersized fast food meals. But our culture and especially our leaders seem to find a lot wrong with "too much" consumption for Others. After all, Iraq had to be invaded because supposedly it had weapons of MASS destruction.

Clearly, on any reasonable reflection, weapons and Saddam Hussein's behavior had little to do with it. When Saddam used deadly chemical warfare with Iran, that tactic was supported by the U.S. When he used them on his own Kurdish population near the Turkish border after the first Gulf War, there was no call for intervention by the U.S. administration. But this current go-it-alone invasion has another rationale — to get strategic access to Iraq's oil. Coincidentally, the war also cancelled out all those contracts Saddam had with Russia and France.

When we consider why the U.S. needs this strategic control of petroleum reserves, it's to fuel those SUVs and all the other wasteful energy consumption in the U.S. For the rest of the world watching, a teenage boy carrying an air conditioner out of a Baghdad police station makes sense, while suburbanite driving to the mall in a Lincoln Navigator to pick up a big box of Pampers disposable diapers seems excessive. Unruly consumption doesn't look the same everywhere or to everybody in the same way.

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